

YOUR PLACE AT GOD'S TABLE



Hope. Pure and simple.

By Max Lucado

Introduction

YOU'RE IN Bethany. The home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. Peer through the window...what do you see?

There's Martha, sleeves rolled up and ready to serve, an Energizer® bunny—reliable, hardworking Martha.

Over there is Mary. On her knees. While Martha serves with her hands, Mary lifts her hands in praise and prayer. For she loves to worship, she lives to pray.

And Lazarus? He's talking about Jesus. He's sharing his pinch-me-I'm-dreaming testimony. "Because of Lazarus many of the Jews were...believing in Jesus" (John 12:11).

Marthas who serve, Marys who pray, and Lazaruses who testify—all seated at the table together. In God's house, each one plays a different role. But each one is needed.

The one who worships

needs

the one who proclaims

needs

the one who serves

needs

the one who worships.

Chapter One

THE PEOPLE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

This is the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed: a Kingdom of acceptance, eternal life and forgiveness.

FIRST of all, it is a kingdom where the rejected are received.

“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear....”

None were more shunned by their culture than the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the deaf. They had no place. No name. No value. Canker sores on the culture. Excess baggage on the side of the road. But those whom the people called trash, Jesus called treasures.

In my closet hangs a sweater that I seldom wear. It is too small. The sleeves are too short, the shoulders too tight. Some of the buttons are missing, and the thread is frazzled. I should throw that sweater away. I have no use for it. I'll never wear it again. Logic says I should clear out the space and get rid of the sweater.

That's what *logic* says.

But *love* won't let me.

Something unique about that sweater makes me keep it. What is unusual about it? For one thing, it has no label. Nowhere on the garment will you find a tag that reads, “Made in Taiwan,” or “Wash in Cold Water.” It has no tag because it wasn’t made in a factory. It has no label because it wasn’t produced on an assembly line. It isn’t the product of a nameless employee earning a living. It’s the creation of a devoted mother expressing her love.

That sweater is unique. One of a kind. It can’t be replaced. Each strand was chosen with care. Each thread was selected with affection.

And though the sweater has lost all of its use, it has lost none of its value. It is valuable not because of its function, but because of its maker.

That must have been what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote, “you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”¹

¹ Psalm 139:13

Think on those words. You were knitted together. You aren't an accident. You weren't mass-produced. You aren't an assembly-line product. You were deliberately planned, specifically gifted, and lovingly positioned on this earth by the Master Craftsman.

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which god prepared in advance for us to do."²

In a society that has little room for second fiddles, that's good news. In a culture where the door of opportunity opens only once and then slams shut, that is a revelation. In a system that ranks the value of a human by the figures of his salary or the shape of her legs...let me tell you something: Jesus' plan is a reason for joy!

Jesus told John that a new kingdom was coming—a kingdom where people have value not because of what they do, but because of *whose* they are.

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The second characteristic of the kingdom is as potent as the first: "The dead have life." The grave has no power.

The year 1899 marked the deaths of two well-known men—Dwight L. Moody, the acclaimed evangelist, and Robert Ingersoll, the famous lawyer, orator, and political leader.

The two men had many similarities. Both were raised in Christian homes. Both were skilled orators. Both traveled extensively and were widely respected. Both drew immense crowds when they spoke and attracted loyal followings. But there was one striking difference between them—their view of God.

Ingersoll was an agnostic and a follower of naturalism; he had no belief in the eternal, but stressed the importance of living only in the here and now. Ingersoll made light of the Bible, stating that "free thought will give us truth." To him the Bible was "a fable, an obscenity, a humbug, a sham and a lie."³ He was a bold spokesman against the Christian faith. He claimed that a Christian "creed [was] the ignorant past bullying the enlightened present."⁴

Ingersoll's contemporary, Dwight L. Moody, had different convictions. He dedicated his life to presenting a resurrected King to a dying people. He embraced the Bible as the hope for humanity and the cross as the turning point of history. He left behind a legacy of written and spoken words, institutions of education, churches, and changed lives.

² Ephesians 2:10

³ George Sweeting and Donald Sweeting, "The Evangelist and The Agnostic," *Moody Monthly*, July/August 1989, 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 67

Two men. Both powerful speakers and influential leaders. One rejected God; the other embraced him. The impact of their decisions is seen most clearly in the way they died. Read how one biographer parallels the two deaths.

Ingersoll died suddenly. The news of his death stunned his family. His body was kept at home for several days because his wife was reluctant to part with it. It was eventually removed for the sake of the family's health.

Ingersoll's remains were cremated, and the public response to his passing was altogether dismal. For a man who put all his hopes on this world, death was tragic and came without the consolation of hope.

Moody's legacy was different. On December 22, 1899, Moody awoke to his last winter dawn. Having grown increasingly weak during the night, he began to speak in slow measured words. "Earth recedes, heaven opens before me!" Son Will, who was nearby, hurried across the room to his father's side.

"Father, you are dreaming," he said.

"No. This is no dream, Will," Moody said, "It is beautiful. It is like a trance. If this is death, it is sweet. God is calling me, and I must go. Don't call me back."

At that point, the family gathered around, and moments later the great evangelist died. It was his coronation day—a day he had looked forward to for many years. He was with his Lord.

The funeral service of Dwight L. Moody reflected that same confidence. There was no despair. Loved ones gathered to sing praise to God at a triumphant home-going service. Many remembered the words the evangelist had spoken earlier that year in New York City: "Someday you will read in the papers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now.... I was born of the flesh in 1837; I was born of the Spirit in 1855. That which is born of the flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit shall live forever."⁵

Jesus looked into the eyes of John's followers and gave them this message. "Report to John...the dead are raised." Jesus wasn't oblivious to John's imprisonment. He wasn't blind to John's captivity. But he was dealing with a greater dungeon than Herod's; he was dealing with the dungeon of death.

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But Jesus wasn't through. He passed on one other message to clear the cloud of doubt out of John's heart: "The good news is preached to the poor."

⁵ Ibid., 69

Some months ago I was late to catch a plane out of the San Antonio airport. I wasn't terribly late, but I was late enough to be bumped and have my seat given to a stand-by passenger.

When the ticket agent told me that I would have to miss the flight, I put to work my best persuasive powers.

“But the flight hasn’t left yet.”

“Yes, but you got here too late.”

“I got here before the plane left; is that too late?”

“The regulation says you must arrive ten minutes before the flight is scheduled to depart. That was two minutes ago.”

“But, ma’am,” I pleaded, “I’ve got to be in Houston by this evening.”

She was patient but firm. “I’m sorry, sir, but the rules say passengers must be at the gate ten minutes before scheduled departure time.”

“I know what the rules say,” I explained. “But I’m not asking for justice; I’m asking for mercy.”

She didn’t give it to me.

But God does. Even though by the “book” I’m guilty, by God’s love I get another chance. Even though by the law I’m indicted, by mercy I’m given a fresh start.

“For it is by grace you have been saved...not by works, so that no one can boast.”⁶

No other world religion offers such a message. All other demand the right performance, the right sacrifice, the right chant, the right ritual, the right séance or experience. Theirs is a kingdom of trade-offs and barterdom. You do this, and God will give you that.

The result? Either arrogance or fear. Arrogance if you think you’ve achieved it, fear if you think you haven’t.

Christ’s kingdom is just the opposite. It is a kingdom for the poor. A kingdom where membership is *granted*, not *purchased*. You are placed into God’s kingdom. You are “adopted.” And this occurs not when you do enough, but when you admit you can’t do enough. You don’t earn it; you simply accept it. As a result, you serve, not out of arrogance or fear, but out of gratitude.

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

I recently read a story of a woman who for years was married to a harsh husband. Each day he would leave her a list of chores to complete before he returned at the end of the day. “Clean the yard. Stack the firewood. Wash the windows....”

If she didn’t complete the tasks, she would be greeted with his explosive anger. But even if she did complete the list, he was never satisfied; he would always find inadequacies in her work.

After several years, the husband passed away. Some time later she remarried, this time to a man who lavished her with tenderness and adoration.

One day, while going through a box of old papers, the wife discovered one of her first husband’s lists. And as she read the sheet, a realization caused a tear of joy to splash on the paper.

“I’m still doing all these things, and no one has to tell me. I do it because I love him.”

That is the unique characteristic of the new kingdom. Its subjects don’t work in order to go to heaven; they work because they are going to heaven. Arrogance and fear are replaced with gratitude and joy.

Chapter Two

PEOPLE WHO PRAY

WHEN they came to a place called the Skull, the soldiers crucified Jesus and the criminals—one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing.”

The soldiers threw lots to decide who would get his clothes. The people stood there watching. And the leaders made fun of Jesus, saying, “He saved others. Let him save himself if he is God’s Chosen One, the Christ.”

The soldiers also made fun of him, coming to Jesus and offering him some vinegar. They said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!” At the top of the cross these words were written: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

One of the criminals on a cross began to shout insults at Jesus: “Aren’t you the Christ? Then save yourself and us.”

But the other criminal stopped him and said, “You should fear God! You are getting the same punishment he is. We are punished justly, getting what we deserve for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

“I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Luke 23:33-43

She nearly missed the flight. In fact, I thought I had the row to myself when I looked up and saw her puffing down the aisle, dragging two large bags.

“I hate to fly,” she blurted out as she fell into her seat. “I put off getting here as long as I can.”

“You almost put it off too long,” I smiled.

She was tall, young, blonde, tan, and talkative. Her jeans were fashionably ripped at the knees. And her black boots boasted silver tips. She really did hate to fly, I learned. And the way she coped with flying was by talking.

“I’m going home to see my dad. He’ll really be amazed at my tan. He thinks I’m crazy living in California—me being single and all. I’ve got this new boyfriend, he’s from Lebanon. He travels a lot though, so I only see him on weekends, which is fine with me because that gives me the house to myself. Its isn’t far from the beach and...”

I've learned what to do when a friendly, attractive woman sits beside me. As soon as possible I reveal my profession and marital status. It keeps us both out of trouble.

"My *wife* hates to fly, too," I jumped in when she took a breath, "so I know how you feel. And since I'm a *minister*, I know a section of the Bible you might like to read as we take off."

I pulled out my Bible from my briefcase and opened it to Psalm 23.

For the first time she was quiet. "The Lord is my shepherd," she read the words then looked up with a broad smile. "I remember this," she said as the plane was taking off. "I read it when I was young."

She turned to read some more. The next time she looked up there was a tear in her eye.

"It's been a long time. A long, long time." She told me how she believed...once. She became a Christian when she was young, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd been to church.

We talked for some about faith and second chances. I asked her if I could ask her a question. She said I could.

"Do you believe in heaven?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think you'll go there?"

She looked away for a minute and then turned and answered confidently, "Yeah. Yeah, I'll be in heaven."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know I'm going to heaven?" She grew quiet as she formulated her response.

Somehow I knew what she was going to say before she said it. I could see it coming. She was going to give me her "list." (Everybody has one.)

"Well, I'm basically good. I don't smoke more than a pack a day. I exercise. I'm dependable at work and," she counted each achievement on a finger, "I made my boyfriend get tested for AIDS."

Ta-da. That was her list. Her qualifications. By her way of thinking, heaven could be earned by good health habits and safe sex. Her line of logic was simple—I keep the list on earth and I get the place in heaven.

Now lest we be too hard on her, let me ask you a question. What's on your list?

Most of us are like the girl on the plane. We think we are “basically good.” Decent, hardworking folk. Most of us have a list to prove it. Maybe yours doesn't include cigarettes or AIDS. But you have a list.

“I pay my bills.”

“I love my spouse and kids.”

“I'm better than Hitler.”

“I'm basically good.”

Most of us have a list. There is a purpose for the list: to prove we are good. But there is a problem with the list: none of us is good enough.

Paul made this point when he placed two short-fused sticks of dynamite in the third chapter of his letter to the Romans. The first is in verse 10. “There is no one who always does what is right,” he wrote, “not even one.” No one. Not you. Not me. Not anyone. The second explosion occurs in verse 23. “All have sinned and are not good enough for God's glory.”

Boom. So much for lists. So much for being “basically good.”

Then how do you go to heaven? If no one is good, if no list is sufficient, if no achievements are adequate, how can a person be saved?

No question is more crucial. To hear Jesus answer it, let's ponder the last encounter he had before death. An encounter between Jesus and two criminals.

All three are being crucified.

One might like to think that these two thieves are victims. Undeserving of punishment. Good men who got a bad rap. Patriots dying a martyr's death. But such is not the case. Matthew dispels any such notion with just one verse, “the robbers who were being crucified beside Jesus also insulted him” (Matt. 27:44).

Tragedy reveals a person's character. And the tragedy of this crucifixion reveals that these two thieves had none. They slander Jesus with their last breaths. Can you hear them? Voices—husky with pain—sneer at the Messiah.

“Some king of the Jews you are.”

“Life is pretty tough on Messiahs these days, eh?”

“How about a little miracle, Galilean?”

“Ever see nails that size in Nazareth?”

You’d expect it from the Pharisees. You’d expect it from the crowd. Even the mocking of the soldiers isn’t surprising. But from the thieves?

Crucified men insulting a crucified man? It’s two men with nooses on their necks ridiculing the plight of a third. Two POWs before a firing squad taunting another’s misfortune.

Could anyone be more blind?

Could anyone be more vile?

No wonder these two are on the cross!

No wonder these two are on the cross! Rome deems them worthy of ugly torture. Their only value to society is to serve as a public spectacle. Strip them naked so all will know that evil cannot hide. Nail their hands so all will see that the wicked have no strength. Post them high so all will tell their children, “That’s what happens to evil men.”

Every muscle in their bodies screams for relief. Nails pulse fire through their arms. Legs contort and twist seeking comfort.

But there is no comfort on a cross.

Yet even the pain of the spike won’t silence their spiteful tongues. These two will die as they lived, attacking the innocent. But in this case, the innocent doesn’t retaliate.

The man they mocked wasn’t much to look at. His body was whip-torn flesh, yanked away from the bone. His face was a mask of blood and spit; eyes puffy and swollen. “King of the Jews” was painted over his head. A crown of thorns pierced his scalp. His lip was split. Maybe his nose was bleeding or a tooth was loose.

The man they mocked was half-dead. The man they mocked was beaten. But the man they mocked was at peace. “Father, forgive them, because they don’t know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

After Jesus’ prayer, one of the criminals began to shout insults at him: “Aren’t you the Christ? Then save yourself and us” (vs. 39).

The heart of this thief remains hard. The presence of Christ crucified means nothing to him. Jesus is worthy of ridicule, so the thief ridicules. He expects his chorus to be harmonized from the other cross. It isn't. Instead, it is challenged.

“You should fear God! You are getting the same punishment he is. We are punished justly, getting what we deserve for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong” (vv. 40-41).

Unbelievable. The same mouth that cursed Christ now defends Christ. What has happened? What has he seen since he has been on the cross? Did he witness a miracle? Did he hear a lecture? Was he read a treatise on the trinity?

No, of course not. According to Luke, all he heard was a prayer, a prayer of grace. But that was enough. Something happens to a man who stands in the presence of God. And something happened to the thief.

Read again his words. “We are punished justly, getting what we deserve.... But this man has done nothing wrong.”

The core of the gospel in one sentence. The essence of eternity through the mouth of a crook:

I am wrong; Jesus is right.

I have failed; Jesus has not.

I deserve to die; Jesus deserves to live.

The thief knew precious little about Christ, but what he knew was precious indeed. He knew that an innocent man was dying an unjust death with no complaint on his lips. And if Jesus can do that, he just might be who he says he is.

So the thief asks for help: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The heavy head of Christ lifts and turns, and the eyes of these two meet. What Jesus sees is a naked man. I don't mean in terms of clothes. I mean in terms of charades. He has no cover. No way to hide.

His title? Scum of the earth. His achievement? Death by crucifixion. His reputation? Criminal. His character? Depraved until the last moment. Until the final hour. Until the last encounter.

Until now.

Tell me, what has this man done to warrant help? He has wasted his life. Who is he to beg for forgiveness? He publicly scoffed at Jesus. What right does he have to pray this prayer?

Do you really want to know? The same right you have to pray yours.

You see, that is you and me on the cross. Naked, desolate, hopeless, and estranged. That is us. That is us asking, “In spite of what I’ve done, in spite of what you see, is there any way you could remember me when we all get home?”

We don’t boast. We don’t produce our list. Any sacrifice appears silly when placed before God on a cross.

It’s more than we deserve. But we are desperate. So we plead. As have so many others: The cripple at the pool. Mary at the wedding. Martha at the funeral. The demoniac at Geresene. Nicodemus at night. Peter on the sea. Jairus on the trail. Joeseph at the stable. And every other human being who has dared to stand before the Son of God and admit his or her need.

We, like the thief, have one more prayer. And we, like the thief, pray.

And we, like the thief, hear the voice of grace. *Today you will be with me in my kingdom.*

And we, like the thief, are able to endure the pain knowing he’ll soon take us home.

Chapter Three

PEOPLE OF PEACE

WANT TO see a miracle? Try this. Take a seed the size of a freckle. Put it under several inches of dirt. Give it enough water, light, and fertilizer. And get ready. A mountain will be moved. It doesn't matter that the ground is a zillion times the weight of the seed. The seed will push it back.

Every spring, dreamers around the world plant tiny hopes in overturned soil. And every spring, their hopes press against impossible odds and blossom.

Never underestimate the power of a seed.

As far as I know, James, the epistle writer, wasn't a farmer. But he knew the power of a seed sown in fertile soil.

“Those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of goodness.”¹

The principle for peace is the same as the principle for crops: Never underestimate the power of a seed.

The story of Heinz is a good example. Europe, 1934. Hitler's plague of anti-Semitism was infecting a continent. Some would escape it. Some would die from it. But eleven-year-old Heinz would learn from it. He would learn the power of sowing seeds of peace.

Heinz was a Jew.

The Bavarian village of Furth, where Heinz lived, was being overrun by Hitler's young thugs. Heinz's father, a schoolteacher, lost his job. Recreational activities ceased. Tension mounted on the streets.

The Jewish families clutched the traditions that held them together—the observance of the Sabbath, of Rosh Hashanah, of Yom Kippur. Old ways took on new significance. As the clouds of persecution swelled and blackened, these ancient precepts were a precious cleft in a mighty rock.

And as the streets became a battleground, such security meant survival.

Hitler youth roamed the neighborhoods looking for trouble. Young Heinz learned

¹ James 3:18, LB

to keep his eyes open. When he saw a band of troublemakers, he would step to the other side of the street. Sometimes he would escape a fight—sometimes not.

One day, in 1934, a pivotal confrontation occurred. Heinz found himself face-to-face with a Hitler bully. A beating appeared inevitable. This time, however, he walked away unhurt—not because of what he did, but because of what he said. He didn't fight back; he spoke up. He convinced the troublemakers that a fight was not necessary. His words kept battle at bay.

And Heinz saw firsthand how the tongue can create peace.

He learned the skill of using words to avoid conflict. And for a young Jew in Hitler-ridden Europe, that skill had many opportunities to be honed.

Fortunately, Heinz's family escaped from Bavaria and made their way to America. Later in life, he would downplay the impact those adolescent experiences had on his development.

But one has to wonder. For after Heinz grew up, his name became synonymous with peace negotiations. His legacy became that of a bridge builder. Somewhere he had learned the power of the properly placed word of peace. And one has to wonder if his training didn't come on the streets of Bavaria.

You don't know him as Heinz. You know him by his Anglicized name, Henry. Henry Kissinger.²

Never underestimate the power of a seed.

How good are you at sowing seeds of peace?

You may not be called on to ward off international conflict, but you will have opportunities to do something more vital: to bring *inner* peace to troubled hearts.

Jesus modeled this. We don't see him settling many disputes or negotiating conflicts. But we do see him cultivating inward harmony through acts of love:

Washing the feet of men he knew would betray him,

Having lunch with a corrupt tax official,

Honoring the sinful woman whom society had scorned.

² Paul Harvey, *Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1977), 49.

He built bridges by healing hurts. He prevented conflict by touching the interior. He cultivated harmony by sowing seeds of peace in fertile hearts.

Do me a favor. Pause for a moment and think about the people who make up your world. Take a stroll through the gallery of faces that are significant to you. Mentally flip through the scrapbook of snapshots featuring those you deal with often.

Can you see their faces? Your spouse. Your best friend. Your golf buddies. Your friends at PTA. Your kids. Your aunt across the country. Your neighbor across the street. The receptionist at work. The new secretary in the next office.

Freeze-frame those mental images for a moment while I tell you how some of them are felling.

I went to our family doctor not long ago. I went for my first check-up since the one required for high school football seventeen years ago.

Since I was way overdue, I ordered the works. One nurse put me on a table and stuck little cold suction cups to my chest. Another nurse wrapped a heavy band around my arm and squeezed a black bulb until my arm tingled. Then they pricked my finger (which always hurts) and told me to fill up a cup (which is always awkward). Then, with all the preliminaries done, they put me in a room and told me to take off my shirt and wait on the doctor.

There is something about being poked, pushed, measured, and drained that makes you feel like a head of lettuce in the produce department. I sat on a tiny stool and stared at the wall.

May I tell you something you know, but may have forgotten? Somebody in your world feels like I felt in that office. The daily push and shove of the world has a way of leaving us worked over and worn out. Someone in your gallery of people is sitting on a cold aluminum stool of insecurity, clutching the backside of a hospital gown for fear of exposing what little pride he or she has left. And that person desperately needs a word of peace.

Someone needs you to do for them what Dr. Jim did for me.

Jim is a small-town doctor in a big city. He still remembers names and keeps pictures of babies he delivered on his office bulletin board. And though you know he's busy, he makes you feel you are his only patient.

After a bit of small talk and few questions about my medical history, he put down my file and said, "Let me take off my doctor hat for a minute and talk to you as a friend."

The chat lasted maybe five minutes. He asked me about my family. He asked me about my work load. He asked me about my stress. He told me he thought I was doing a good job at the church and that he loved to read my books.

Nothing profound, nothing probing. He went no deeper than I allowed. But I had the feeling he would have gone to the bottom of the pit with me had I needed him to.

After those few minutes, Dr. Jim went about his task of tapping my knee with his rubber hammer, staring down my throat, looking in my ear, and listening to my chest. When he was all done, as I was buttoning up my shirt, he took his doctor hat off again and reminded me not carry the world on my shoulders. “And be sure to love your wife and hug those kids, because when it all boils down to it, you’re not much without them.”

“Thanks, Jim,” I said.

And he walked out as quickly as he’d come in—a seed sower in a physician’s smock.

Want to see a miracle? Plant a word of love heartdeep in a person’s life. Nurture it with a smile and a prayer, and watch what happens.

An employee gets a compliment. A wife receives a bouquet of flowers. A cake is baked and carried next door. A widow is hugged. A gas-station attendant is honored. A preacher is praised.

Sowing seeds of peace is like sowing beans. You don’t know why it works; you just know it does. Seeds are planted, and topsoils of hurt are shoved away.

Don’t forget the principle. Never underestimate the power of a seed.

God didn’t. When his kingdom was ravaged and his people had forgotten his name, he planted his seed.

When the soil of the human heart had grown crusty, he planted his seed. When religion had become a ritual and the temple a trading post, he planted his seed.

Want to see a miracle? Watch him as he places the seed of his own self in the fertile womb of a Jewish girl.

Up it grew, “like a tender green shoot, sprouting from a root in dry and sterile ground.”³ The seed spent a lifetime pushing back the stones that tried to keep it underground. The seed made a ministry out of shoving away the rocks that cluttered his father’s soil.

³ Isaiah 53:2, LB

The stones of legalism that burdened backs.

The stones of oppression that broke bones.

The stones of prejudice that fenced out the needy.

But it was the final stone that proved to be the supreme test of the seed. The stone of death—rolled by humans and sealed by Satan in front of the tomb. For a moment it appeared the seed would be stuck in the earth. For a moment, it looked like this rock was too big to be budged.

But then, somewhere in the heart of the earth, the seed of God stirred, shoved, and sprouted. The ground trembled, and the rock of the tomb tumbled. And the flower of Easter blossomed.

Never underestimate the power of a seed.

STUDY GUIDE

CHAPTER ONE THE PEOPLE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

“Blessed are those who persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

1. According to this chapter, why did John send word to ask Jesus if he was really the Messiah?
2. Name a situation in which you have felt persecuted for doing what was right. What was the outcome of your experience?
3. This chapter states, “God has never turned away the questions of a sincere searcher.” Do you feel comfortable with this idea of questioning God? Why or why not? When you get to heaven, what are some questions you want to ask him?
4. The Book of Job is another biblical account of a person who suffered from God’s seeming silence in the face of injustice. When struck with numerous, undeserved afflictions, he, too, questioned God. But Job’s questions were different, as were the answers he received and the outcome of the story.
 - Read Job 3:23, 7:20-21, 10:2-7, 13:20-24, 24:1-12. What questions did Job ask God?
 - Read Job 38:1-21, 40:1-14, and 42:1-6. What was God’s answer? How was it similar to Jesus’ answer to John? How was it different?
5. Write down three characteristics of Christ’s kingdom that are implied in Jesus’ answer to John. In what ways have you seen these characteristics continuing in your lifetime?
6. This chapter relates this beatitude back to the first one, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” which also states, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Why do you think the phrase was repeated? How does being poor in spirit relate to being persecuted for the sake of righteousness?

CHAPTER TWO PEOPLE WHO PRAY

Looking Under the Stones:

1. Do most of your friends and acquaintances believe in heaven? What do they think it’s like?

2. How do most of the people you know believe someone “makes it” to heaven? What is on their “list?”
3. What is on *your* list of what it takes to get to heaven? How can you be confident that your list is accurate?
4. How did one of the thieves crucified with Jesus go so quickly from reviling the Lord to asking for a reservation in paradise?
5. Max imagines that the thief thought, “I am wrong; Jesus is right. I have failed; Jesus has not. I deserve to die; Jesus deserves to live.” How do these statements constitute “the core of the gospel?”
6. How do you feel about Max’s conviction that, “You see, that is you and me on the cross. Naked, desolate, hopeless, and estranged. That is us?” Is this insulting or accurate? Explain your answer.
7. Do you agree that “we, like the thief, are able to endure the pain knowing he’ll soon take us home?” Why or why not?
8. If in heaven you could ask the thief on the cross any question at all, what would you ask him? Why?

Building on the Rock:

1. Read Romans 10:9-13
 - a. How can we enter into a life-giving relationship with God, according to this passage? What “list” does this passage give?
 - b. How does the thief’s story stack up against this passage? Is his conversion story a good illustration of what Paul wrote here?
 - c. Have you ever taken the steps Paul outlines here?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-5, 17:6-2
 - a. For what purpose has God made us, according to verses 4 and 5? What guarantee has he given us that he will fulfill his promise to us?
 - b. How is verse 21 an excellent summary of the gospel message? According to 6:1-2, how do we apply the work of Christ to our own behalf?

CHAPTER THREE

PEOPLE OF PEACE

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”

1. How would you define peace as it is portrayed in this chapter? How does this concept of peace differ from more common ideas about peace?
2. Commentator Dale Bruner writes, “We can almost translate the key word here, ‘peacemakers,’ with the word ‘wholmakers.’... Biblical *shalom* conveys the picture of a circle; it means comprehensive well-being in every direction and relation.... If we could translate ‘blessed are the circle makers’ and make sense, we would. To make peace, in Scripture, is to bring community. Peacemakers are reconcilers” (*The Christbook*, 149). How do the examples of peacemaking given in this chapter fit Bruner’s definition?
3. Read at least three of the following scriptures:

Numbers 6:24-26, Psalm 29:11, Luke 1:76-79, John 14:27, 16:33, Romans 5:1, 1

Corinthians 14:33, Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 2:14-17, and Philippians 4:7.

According to these passages and to chapter 14, what is the ultimate source of peace?

4. Read James 3:13-18. What are some of the “prerequisites” for peacemaking? What must happen inside us before we can be peacemakers?
5. Read Matthew 10:34-39. Are there times when peacemaking in the larger sense involves accepting conflict rather than avoiding it? Does it ever involve *initiating* conflict? If possible, give a biblical or contemporary example.
6. Is it enough simply to plant seeds of peace? Are there ways we can nurture them and help them grow?
7. Is the “push for power” a basic part of human nature? Can it ever be a positive thing? How can we avoid it?
8. How does power relate to peacemaking? Can power ever be used in the *service* of peacemaking? Why or why not?
9. Write down the names of three people in your life who could use a word or act of peace from you. Beside each person’s name, write an idea for a “seed” of peace. Finally, write down a specific date and time to plant your seed and commit to that schedule. If you are meeting in a group, be prepared to share your “peace seed” (not necessarily the results) at the next meeting. If you are on your own, consider sharing your peace initiatives with a friend and asking to be held accountable.

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